**4 Where do you come from?**

**4.1 Race and place**

The following poem was written by Jackie Kay who was born in Glasgow in 1961. Her mother was a white Scottish woman and her father was a black Nigerian student. She has written extensively about the subject of identity in the context of her own experience – for example, of being an adopted child, brought up in Glasgow.

**Activity 4**

Now read the poem.

**So you think I'm a mule?**

‘Where do you come from?’

‘I'm from Glasgow.’

‘Glasgow?’

‘Uh huh. Glasgow.’

The white face hesitates

the eyebrows raise

the mouth opens

then snaps shut

incredulous

yet too polite to say outright

liar

she tries another manoeuvre

‘And you parents?’

‘Glasgow and Fife.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes. Oh?’

Snookered she wonders where she should go

from here –

‘Ah, but you're not pure’

‘Pure? Pure what.

‘Pure white? Ugh. What a plight

Pure? Sure I'm pure

I'm rare …’

‘Well, that's not exactly what I mean,

I mean … you're a mulatto, just look at ...'

‘Listen. My original father was Nigerian

to help with your confusion

But hold on right there

If you Dare mutter mulatto

hover around hybrid

hobble on half-caste

and intellectualise on the

'mixed race problem’

I have to tell you:

take your beady eyes offa my skin;

don't concern yourself with

the ‘dialectics of mixtures';

don't pull that strange blood crap

on me Great White Mother.

Say, I'm no mating of a

she-ass and a stallion

no half of this and half of that

to put it plainly purely

I am Black

My blood flows evenly, powerfully

and when they shout ‘Nigger’

and you shout ‘Shame’

ain't nobody debating my blackness.

You see that fine African nose of mine,

my lips, my hair, You see lady

I'm not mixed up about it.

So take your questions, your interest,

your patronage. Run along.

Just leave me.

I'm going to my Black sisters

to women who nourish each other

on belonging

There's a lot of us

Black women struggling to define

just who we are

where we belong

and if we know no home

we know one thing:

we are Black

we're at home with that.’

‘Well, that's all very well, but …’

‘I know it's very well.

No But. Good bye.’

Source: Kay, 1991

* What is meant by the question ‘where do you come from?’?
* What is the relationship being drawn between place and identity here?
* What does Kay mean when she writes ‘I am Black’ and then ‘we are Black’?

[Reveal discussionHide discussion](http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=399036&section=1.4.1)

**Discussion**

**Comment**

The poem indicates some of the ways in which we link identity to place and the criteria which are used for making those connections. In everyday interactions we interpret the clues which are *given* and *given off* and classify people accordingly. For many of us it is no longer possible to ‘read off’ identity from the same signals we might have used in the past. This poem represents a contemporary question about identity. In attempting to classify people according to where they come from we may be thrown, when there are contradictory messages given off.

In this situation it is suggested that the white woman is confused by Kay's claims to be ‘from Glasgow’ because she apparently feels that black people cannot be ‘really’ Scottish (or British). The poem describes how the white woman here ignores the replies (and Kay's Glaswegian accent presumably) and insists that to be black is to be an outsider.

The poem also highlights the way in which identity is marked by **difference**. People mark their identities by some symbols of difference – scarves, badges, clothes, ways of speaking. This time the difference suggests that the white woman defines Kay as an outsider, in an *unequal* relationship of ‘us and them’. ‘Us’ includes people who are the same as us, using the criteria which we think mark us out as the same, for example being white; ‘them’ are marked out as different because ‘they’ are not the same as ‘us’. This suggests that ‘we British’ could be a superior category to ‘those foreigners’. The key point about difference in the example of the poem is that being black or white is not only a way of marking difference but is used as a means of asserting superiority. Such assertions of superiority and the attempt to exclude people on grounds of ‘race’ and ethnicity can be described as racist.

This poem is also about a search for certainty and disquiet about uncertainty. When ‘snookered’ by her earlier questions the white woman resorts to questions about ‘purity’. She is seeking to locate identity in a category which we can mark off as fixed and certain. Kay's response to the misconceptions of the white woman is to deny any uncertainty on her own part. She gives voice to a collective identity which has meaning for her as an individual. She may be unclear about where she ‘comes from’ but is quite certain about who she is, who she wants to be and with whom she belongs. In her response Kay is offering one possible solution to the uncertainties posed by the question ‘where do you come from?’ in a multicultural and multi-ethnic society.

**Definition**

**Difference**

Difference is relational. It has to be defined in relation to something else. For example, Monday is the day after Sunday and the day before Tuesday. Difference often involves oppositions which are unequal.

Multi-ethnicity and cultural diversity arising from the cultural differences in the contemporary UK raise a number of questions about uncertainty and diversity and about the ways in which people have the possibility, or not, of constructing their own identities. How can people respond so that they can actively engage with shaping their own identities? What kind of action is appropriate and how do we resolve the dilemmas with which we are presented? One strategy is to assert and celebrate difference as Kay does in her poem, in order to take control of her own identity. We can see here the unequal power relations that shape and influence the construction of identities, shown in this context in relation to racist ideas and practices.

**Summary**

* Identity is based on being the same as some people and different from others.
* Identities are constructed in relation to place.
* Difference is unequally weighted and can create categories of outsiders.
* Individuals and groups have to negotiate both the uncertainties of social change and the constraints of inequality.